

Lee Lauderback Sets a Record

10,000 Hours of Mustang Flying

BY BUDD DAVISSON



Lee Lauderback, undoubtedly the highest-time Mustang pilot in history, poses with Stallion 51's two Mustangs and a feathered friend. (Photo by Moose Petersen)

"I think the thing I like most about my time with the Mustang has been the people I've met through it." The speaker is Lee Lauderback, founder/owner of Stallion 51, the longtime Mustang check-out haven in Kissimmee, Florida. He recently had a good week in which he logged his 10,000th hour in the P-51D and was inducted into the Florida Aviation Hall of Fame.

In the civilian-pilot population, crossing the 1,000-hour threshold is a seminal moment. The majority of private pilots seldom reach it. During World War II, it wasn't unusual for a fighter pilot to spend the entire war in the cockpit and come out with 800 to 1,500 hours, and that was spread out over various trainers and several different fighters. In any situation—combat or civilian, with the exception of airline pilots who fly very long legs—to log 10,000 hours in the same airplane type almost never happens. And when that type is the Mustang, it is unheard of. Even Bob Hoover, the recognized Mustang legend, only had about 7,500 hours. So for Lee to log 10,000 hours behind a Merlin is a feat that has never before been accomplished and is unlikely to happen again. But he says it couldn't have happened without some important people, chief among them being his twin brothers, Peter and Richard. Within the Mustang community, they are usually referred to as "The Brothers."

Lee says, "The Mustang is a fairly sophisticated airplane, especially for that period, but that was over 75 years ago, which makes maintaining the airplane, especially the engine, even more complicated and necessary. My brothers are my life insurance. If they hadn't been there, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing."

Lee got his first flight in a Mustang in the front seat of Gordon Plaskett's TF-51D, one of the few Mustangs actually built as a two-place trainer. His response to the airplane was immediate.

"I can't explain why," he says, "but it felt as if I was meant to be in that cockpit flying that airplane. I was 26 years old, and I remember thinking 'I gotta do this a lot!'"

"I learned to fly in high school, and when I started climbing the pilot ladder, I eventually found myself managing and flying Arnold Palmer's Citations, Lears, and helicopters. I did that for 17 years, but the Mustang was always on my mind. I formed a partnership with a friend, and we bought the airplane that we're still flying, Crazy Horse, in '87 and started doing training with the likes of the U.S. Navy Test Pilot School at Pax River. I was fitting this in with my golfing flights, but in 1990, I went full time and bought my partner out. We already had Stallion 51 going, and today, we're flying over 1,000 hours per year in our two Mustangs.

"I can't believe I've been doing this for 30 years.

You'd think I'd get tired of it, but that'll never happen. First, the Mustang feels like an old pair of well-worn loafers, and I never tire of sharing it with someone who has never had that experience before.

"What really makes it worthwhile is sharing the airplane with vets who knew the Mustang when both the pilot and the airplane were in their prime. I've lost track of the number of vets I've flown with who want to relive what some seem to see as the best time of their life. I've also flown with guys like Bud Anderson and Robin Olds, who were successful in combat as Mustang pilots, and

I always find it amazing how they may not have strapped on a Mustang for more than 70 years, yet from my point of view as an instructor, it's as if they never left it. They've forgotten nothing because they love the airplane as much as I do. It's an honor to fly with men like that.

"The same thing holds true for the nearly 18 years that I've been privileged to fly as part of the U.S. Air Force Heritage Flights. There, I'm formed up on today's jets being flown by real fighter pilots, and it always leaves me amazed that I'm actually doing that. Sometimes it seems surreal."

When Lee is flying his signature airshow routine in Crazy Horse, every spectator is enjoying it, but Lee has the best seat in the house. Plus, he's working his way toward the next 10K hours. ✦

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